

This is a repository copy of *Willem van Schendel (ed.), Embedding Agricultural Commodities. Using Historical Evidence, 1840s-1940s. (London/New York: Routledge, 2017). 193 p. isbn 9781472461865.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/150989/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Cottyn, Hanne Dominique Geertrui Jeannine orcid.org/0000-0002-5222-3738 (2018) Willem van Schendel (ed.), *Embedding Agricultural Commodities. Using Historical Evidence, 1840s-1940s.* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017). 193 p. isbn 9781472461865. TSEG/Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History. p. 117. ISSN 2468-9068

<https://doi.org/10.18352/tseg.1008>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

ham's rather graphic descriptions of cruelty by overseers in the West Indies and mass deaths in a famine-stricken Bengal are really as insufficient as Blythman seems to feel.

After all *The Hungry Empire* is not as much an ethical manifesto on how to deal with Britain's imperial past as a compelling in-depth mapping of the way desires and demands for food shaped and influenced the decisions, policies, and events which in their turn shaped the modern world.

Dennis De Vriese, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Willem van Schendel (ed.), *Embedding Agricultural Commodities. Using Historical Evidence, 1840s-1940s*. (London/New York: Routledge, 2017). 193 p. ISBN 9781472461865.

DOI: 10.18352/tseg.1008

In *Embedding Agricultural Commodities*, edited by Willem van Schendel, diverse historical sources figure as protagonists. Each is the product of (neo)colonial endeavours to accommodate the cultivation of profitable cash crops to particular environments. In that way, the compilation links the daily struggles of nineteenth and early twentieth century agricultural investors, planters, workers and scientists to the everyday struggle of twenty-first century historians. The red thread is the process of 'embedding', defined as the insertion of new commodities and production modes into specific social contexts and the efforts made to make these last. Polanyi, and later Granovetter, developed the term to stress how economic developments are embedded in social relations, and not the other way around (p. 3). All contributions emphasize that embedding is 'not a state but a balancing act' (p. 4).

Between Van Schendel's methodological introduction and Van der Linden's theoretical epilogue, the book comprises six in-depth analyses from the vantage point of one specific historical source (a diary, petition, mail report, book review, scientific study, and survey). Case studies cover indigo, coffee, tobacco and sugar, and link British India and Dutch Indonesia to Cuba under neo-colonial U.S. tutelage. An outlining of the global trajectories of these commodities is provided (oddly placed at the end of the book), but no specific comparison is made. However, the authors do explicitly refer to each other, hinting at a sustained collective discussion anticipating this publication.

The book has a double ambition. A first objective consists in the methodological evaluation of the potential and restrictions of particular sources to trace embedding processes. Not the (limited) range in places and commodities, but the

variation in sources and source contexts structures this compilation. Second, the case studies seek to gain deeper empirical knowledge about the mechanisms and the success of making and keeping a specific crop embedded.

While starting from a shared concept, an overly narrow definition was avoided. Rather, embedding is broadly approached as a continuous renegotiation over the accommodation of global commodities to local conditions. Critical source interpretation unveils how the big Eurocentric 'embedding' ambitions are pursued through trial and error and often lead to an unstable outcome. In the analysis, the 'agents of embedding' (p. 5) take centre stage, and the social context in which they operated is specified, thereby giving a face to an often perceived anonymous process. In so doing, the authors evidence how the pretended adjustment of pre-existing socio-economic systems provoked tensions between individual agency (of industrial entrepreneurs in chapter 2, or scientists in chapter 6) and structural forces, between different production and labour systems (for example coffee smallholder versus plantations in chapter 4, or forced tobacco contracts versus free cultivation in chapter 5). Or between established and new (Liberal) political agendas (chapter 3), and between longstanding and modernized cultivation techniques (as in Cuban sugar production, chapter 7). These tensions could disrupt (through violent resistance, chapter 5) or halt (through conservative 'reluctance', chapter 7) the embedding of agricultural commodities. Across the case studies, the management of knowledge (production) emerges as the underlying driver of these struggles and could be added to the conditions which Van der Linden identifies as essential to successful embedding, i.e. the management of nature, market links and labour (p. 168).

It is key to remark how the book brings the capitalist world back to its agricultural roots. To question its dominant industrial face is in line with a current regained awareness of global capitalism's rural origins.¹ As exposed in the concluding global reflection, the 'transcontinental (re-)embedding' of cash crops was and remains structured by the transfer and adjustment of agricultural labour and resources within the South, managed by states and companies in the North (p. 150). By shifting the focus towards the local dis-/re-embedding power games at play, the authors provide critical global studies of commodity production with a richer empirical insight into the messiness of this unequal exchange.

Another significant contribution is the book's revaluation of the historian's real craft. As historical commodity production research will increasingly engage with new digital techniques, the art of 'reading against the grain' becomes ever more

1 This rediscovery is exemplified in the international and interdisciplinary networks coordinated by some of the authors. See: <https://commoditiesofempire.org.uk/> and <https://wigh.wcfia.harvard.edu/commodity-frontiers-initiative>.

critical to preventing sources from being reduced to database stuffing. Still, the book could have exploited more its interdisciplinary and comparative potential by reflecting on the methodological implications of different (for example oral or non-textual) sources and the digital turn, and on the relevance of the gained insights for the study of other regions, time frames and (non-agricultural) commodities. Overall, the publication makes an eloquent appeal for in-depth research into the local power dynamics of the seemingly teleological and uniform trajectories of agricultural globalization.

Hanne Cottyn, Ghent University

Jurjen Vis, *Diaconie. Vijf eeuwen armenzorg in Den Haag*. (Amsterdam: Boom, 2017). 488 p. ISBN 9789024406364.

DOI: 10.18352/tseg.1013

In de geschiedenis van de sociale zorg in Nederland spelen de kerkgemeenschappen van oudsher de voornaamste rol. In Nederland was daarbij de rol van de Nederduits-Gereformeerde (later Nederlands-Hervormde) kerk heel lang het grootst gezien de omvang van de aan haar toevertrouwde kudde. Elke hervormde kerkgemeenschap had van meet af aan een diaconie, een college van diakenen die de giften van de gelovigen ten behoeve van de armenzorg inzamelden en verdeelden onder de behoeftigen. In veel Nederlandse plaatsen hadden de diakenen van de hervormde kerk niet alleen de zorg voor de eigen kudde, maar voor alle armen.

Zo was ook heel lang de situatie in Den Haag, waar de diaconie nog altijd één van de best voorziene en voornaamste organisaties van sociale zorg is. Het voltooiën van de (her)ordering van het omvangrijke archief was in 2012 aanleiding voor de diaconie om haar geschiedenis te laten vastleggen. De opdracht daartoe werd vergund aan de ervaren historicus Jurjen Vis, die zijn sporen op het gebied van armenzorgsgeschiedenis ruimschoots heeft verdiend en die vier jaar mocht uittrekken voor onderzoek en schrijven. Uitgeverij Boom werd aangetrokken om er een buitengewoon fraai vormgegeven boek van te maken, gebonden met leeslint en een prettig lezende letter.

Diaconale archieven zijn voor de geschiedenis van de sociale zorg een belangrijke bron en deze zijn dan ook veelvuldig gebruikt voor studies naar de armenzorg in het verleden, zoals in *Bijstand in Amsterdam, ca. 1800-1850. Armenzorg als beheersings- en overlevingsstrategie* (Zwolle 1992) van Marco H.D. van Leeuwen of *Dese bekommerlijke tijden, armenzorg, armen en armoede in de stad Groningen 1594-1795* (Assen 2009) van Albert Buursma. Vis' boek wijkt daarvan af